Anti-Black Racism in Food Advertising: Rogers’ Golden Syrup and the Imagery of White Supremacy in the Canadian West

Abstract: Between 1947 and 1958, B.C. Sugar—western Canada’s largest sugar manufacturer—ran six major advertising campaigns that depicted Black people as laborers on sugarcane plantations. One of these campaigns, moreover, played upon offensive stereotypes of Black men as happy-go-lucky, childlike, and suited for manual labor. Analyzing the reach, content, and significances of these campaigns, this article suggests that despite increased civil and human rights advocacy in the 1940s and 1950s, at least one major Canadian corporation persisted in distributing anti-Black racist advertising. Such persistence reveals that white supremacist sentiment was entrenched in western Canada during this time. It also suggests that the western Canadian sugar industry particularly, and the North American food industry more generally, have been prone to anti-Black racism within advertising.

In June 2020, following weeks of international Black Lives Matter demonstrations, many large corporations announced that they would be retiring their anti-Black racist advertising icons. Most famously, PepsiCo announced that it was discontinuing its Aunt Jemima figure and trademark. Mars, Inc. followed, stating that it was discontinuing Uncle Ben (Wheeler 2020). B&G Foods, Inc. also announced that it would review its “Rastus” character on its Cream of Wheat packages (Wright 2020).

Such steps are welcome, but they are also remarkably late. Since the 1960s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has been publicly against anti-Black stereotypes in advertising (Thompson 2015, 229). That it took weeks of major protests to finally convince major corporations to remove such symbols speaks to the strength of the notion that it was acceptable to advertise via anti-Black stereotypes. For PepsiCo, Mars, and B&G Foods, the long-held determination to maintain racist icons no doubt hinged on the notion that brand recognition, even if racist, was more valuable to the company than was a public statement regarding racial equality.

These are large, multinational corporations. Yet Canadian advertising, too, has a racist past. Aunt Jemima used to be owned by the Canadian corporation Quaker Oats, which curated and disseminated the Aunt Jemima image between 1919 and 2001 (Thompson 2015, 205). Other Canadian companies have similarly engaged in anti-Black stereotyping. The washing machine manufacturer Cummer-Dowswell ran eight anti-Black advertisements in the Canadian Home Journal between 1910 and 1912. These ads contained racist caricatures of Black women, specifically portraying them as primitive and ignorant (Kinahan 2013, 188). Additional companies that have used anti-Black stereotypes within Canadian publications include Edison and Rennie’s Seeds, also in 1912 (191).

This article furthers understandings of anti-Black racism within food advertising by examining the specific case of Rogers’ Golden Syrup. Invented in 1913, this product was manufactured by B.C. Sugar—western Canada’s largest sugar manufacturer—until 2008, at which point B.C. Sugar merged with Lantic Inc. Now sold by Lantic, this syrup remains in circulation ("Rogers Golden Syrup" n.d.). During the 1930s, advertisements for Rogers’ Golden Syrup started appearing in all of western Canada’s major newspapers. Many of these ads, importantly, included images of people. With a few exceptions, as discussed below, most such people were white. Rogers’ Golden Syrup advertisements thus resembled many other Canadian advertisements from this time, which, as Cheryl Thompson (2019, 98), Valerie Korinek (2000, 125), Franca Iacovetta (2000, 15), and Janis Thiessen (2017) argue, tended to portray Canadian consumers as exclusively white.

In 1947, however, B.C. Sugar began including Black people in its advertisements. Between that year and 1958, six
major Rogers’ Golden Syrup campaigns included illustrations of Black people. Four of these campaigns were published in major newspapers across western Canada; two of them also appeared in Canadian magazines. As well, at least one of them appeared on a billboard in Vancouver. Yet whereas B.C. Sugar tended to portray white people as modern and Canadian, these advertisements depicted Black people as workers in tropical locations. More specifically, they represented Black people as manual laborers on sugarcane plantations. In one instance, moreover, B.C. Sugar portrayed a Black sugarcane harvester in a stereotypical “Sambo”-like caricature (Boskin 1988). Through such characterizations, a Black sugarcane harvester in a stereotypical “Sambo”-like caricature. In one instance, moreover, B.C. Sugar portrayed a Black sugarcane harvester in a stereotypical “Sambo”-like caricature.

B.C. Sugar suggested that Black people were neither modern nor Canadian. It also implied that Black people were well suited to sugarcane labor, and that they were furthermore acceptable targets of white Canadians’ amusement.

By examining these representations, this article contributes toward a broader understanding of how major North American food corporations have historically represented Black people. Marilyn Kern-Foxworth (1994), the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia (“Anti-Black Imagery”), William Woyhs Weaver (2006), and Naa Oyo A. Kwate (2019) have each provided substantial analyses of anti-Black stereotypes within nineteenth- and twentieth-century American advertising. As they have argued, food companies have been especially drawn to anti-Black stereotypes. In an analysis of why this has been so, Kern-Foxworth (1994) notes that “Southern hospitality during slavery was defined and influenced by Black cooks and chefs, so much so that—as Karen Jewell writes—Americans came to see blacks ‘as the ultimate experts in cookery’” (62). Anti-Black stereotypes were present within food advertising for other reasons as well. In her study of anti-Black racist restaurants in twentieth- and twenty-first-century America (2019), Kwate finds that “Black people are thought to be naturally affiliated with food” (81). As she writes, “Blackness makes the food more primal, subversive, and real” (86).

The case of Rogers’ Golden Syrup between 1947 and 1958 provides further evidence that the food industry has historically turned to anti-Black stereotypes to lend an air of authenticity to products. Specifically, Rogers’ Golden Syrup—which was made from cane sugar—competed in a marketplace that was saturated with corn syrup. By emphasizing its syrup’s cane origins, B.C. Sugar attempted to distinguish itself from its competitors. It also attempted to play up long-held associations between cane sugar, on the one hand, and “true” sugar, on the other. Particularly during the Second World War, debates raged within Canada about which types of sugar were suited for canning. Many times, homemakers argued that cane sugar was the original and best of the sugars (for example, Middleton 1943). By including images of Black sugarcane workers within its advertising, then, B.C. Sugar portrayed its syrup as superior to other brands. It also depicted its syrup as more exotic. Whereas corn syrup could be made from plants grown in temperate countries, cane syrup originated from the tropics. In these ways, B.C. Sugar made its syrup stand out in the marketplace.

Yet even as B.C. Sugar’s advertisers sent such messages, so did they communicate other views. Of particular importance was their implicit suggestion that Black people, as sugarcane laborers, were not modern Canadians. Indeed, even though Black people lived in western Canada, and had done so since at least 1779 (Vernon 2020, 15), B.C. Sugar before 1960 never portrayed Black people as Canadian. It also never portrayed them as consumers. Instead, B.C. Sugar depicted Black people as scintillating objects of the white Canadian gaze. In the advertising “tableaux” (Marchand 1985, 164) of Rogers’ Golden Syrup, Black people were exotic-looking manual workers whose bodily labor provided commodities for white consumers.

Given Canadian advertising’s long history of whiteness (Thompson 2019; Belisle 2020), such representations may not seem particularly surprising. Nonetheless, they do remain significant. They indicate that, despite the extensive campaigns for civil and human rights occurring both in Canada and internationally during the 1940s and 1950s, at least one major Canadian food manufacturer saw fit to distribute anti-Black racist imagery. This decision, in turn, highlights the strength of white supremacy in western Canada during this time. It particularly supports the findings of Crawford Kilian (2008), Sarah-Jane Mathieu (2010), Robyn Maynard (2017), Karina Vernon (2020), and others who have shown the 1940s and 1950s to be especially oppressive. That is, even as many Canadian provinces during this time were passing anti-discrimination legislation (Mathieu 2010, 21–22), many powerful western Canadian whites continued to enforce de facto segregationist policies. Kilian (2008), especially, has offered numerous examples of anti-Black racism during the 1940s and 1950s, showing that Black travelers had difficulty obtaining hotel rooms in Vancouver (Kindle loc. 2857), that Black homeowners in Vancouver sometimes “received threatening letters warning” them to leave white residential neighborhoods (2876), that Black men had difficulty finding skilled employment (2876), and that one Vancouver private school in 1954 told the Jamaican wife of a white male teacher never to visit the school grounds lest “the boys come and see a colored person here” (quoted on 2896). Such findings, in turn, dovetail with the memories of many Black Albertans who, in
the documentary film We Are the Roots: Black Settlers and Their Experiences of Discrimination on the Canadian Prairies (2018), share personal experiences of discrimination in the education, worship, entertainment, and employment sectors in Edmonton during those years.

By analyzing B.C. Sugar’s Rogers’ Golden Syrup campaigns from 1947 to 1958, this article thus reveals that, despite both widespread anti-racist advocacy and the passing of many provincial civil and human rights laws in the postwar years, many western Canadian businesses and newspapers depicted Black people in exotic, servile, and entertaining roles. Such depictions, in turn, demonstrate that social and cultural change did not always accompany change in the legal realm. They also suggest that the food industry may have been particularly resistant to reform. As this article shows, B.C. Sugar used racist tropes to sell syrup. For this company, as for PepsiCo, Mars, and B&G Foods, among other corporations, representations of Black people in servile and dehumanizing positions had more value than did steps toward more respectful and inclusive treatment.

Authentic and Exotic: Race and the Politics of Sugarcane

First manufactured at B.C. Sugar’s Vancouver refinery in 1910, Rogers’ Golden Syrup was—and remains—a gold-colored table syrup. The result of several years of experiments to turn blackstrap molasses into a lightweight product, Rogers’ Golden Syrup began selling in western Canada during the First World War (Rogers 1958, 71). In 1933, B.C. Sugar hired local advertiser J.J. Gibbons to create advertisements for Rogers’ Golden Syrup. Gibbons, in turn, placed employee James Lovick on the account. He created five advertisements that ran in Vancouver newspapers throughout 1933 and 1934 (Schreiner 1989, 123). From that point, Rogers’ Golden Syrup’s ads began to appear fairly regularly. Between 1936 and 1958, Rogers’ ads appeared on the west coast and in Saskatchewan. In 1939, Rogers’ Golden Syrup advertisements began appearing in Alberta and Manitoba. Until 1960, Rogers’ ads appeared on a near-weekly basis in the following newspapers: Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Province, Chilliwack Progress, Victoria Times Colonist, Nanaimo Daily News, Lethbridge Herald, Red Deer Advocate, Calgary Herald, Edmonton Journal, Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, Regina Leader-Post, and Winnipeg Tribune. During the late 1940s, when Rogers’ Golden Sugar briefly appeared in Ontario grocery stores, B.C. Sugar also placed Rogers’ Golden Syrup ads in the Globe and Mail. Ads for Rogers’ syrup further appeared in magazines such as The Country Guide (“Only Rogers’ Has It!” 1954) as well as on billboards throughout the Vancouver area (B.C. Sugar 1990).³

Over the years, numerous themes appeared in Rogers’ Golden Syrup advertising. What remained constant, however, was that Rogers’ Golden Syrup was made from pure sugarcane. For B.C. Sugar, it was important to emphasize this fact because cane syrup competed with corn syrup. This was especially the case during the Second World War, when the federal government defined cane syrup and corn syrup as interchangeable. According to rationing guidelines, consumers could use sugar coupons to buy 1 pound of table sugar, 24 ounces of preserves, 4 pounds of honey, 40 ounces of canned fruit, 48 ounces of maple syrup, 80 ounces of molasses, 40 ounces of fruit sugar, or 30 ounces of either cane syrup or corn syrup (“Rationing Timetable” 1946, 11). Postwar prices continued to affirm this equivalence. One decade after the war, Rogers’ Golden Syrup was selling in Alberta for 35 cents per two-pound tin (“Woodwards” 1956, 9). Two-pound tins of Bee Hive Corn Syrup were selling for slightly more, at 38 cents each (“Foods for Lenten Menus” 1956, 21). Crown Brand Corn Syrup was selling for 89 cents per five-pound tin (“Eaton’s Foodateria” 1956, 15). Maple syrup was much more expensive, selling at 79 cents for a sixteen-ounce jug (“Woodward’s Food Floors” 1956, 7). Corn syrup and cane syrup were thus similarly priced, though the latter was slightly cheaper than the former. Maple syrup, a premium product, was in a different category altogether (Jewett 2018).

Most often, B.C. Sugar simply used the words pure and cane to highlight its products’ star ingredient (“There’s Nothin Like . . .” November 1956, 62; “Pure Cane Sugar Flavor”). Beginning in 1946, however, the company embarked on a new tactic. Specifically, it began including references to tropical settings. It did so by making both verbal and visual references to the countries from which B.C. Sugar imported its sugarcane. Specific verbal references occurred in 1946, 1947, and 1948. According to one advertisement that circulated extensively, Rogers’ Golden Syrup was made from “cane sugar” grown in “the sunny Fiji Islands and West Indies” (for example, “Rogers’ Golden Syrup,” Times Colonist 1946, 4). And, according to an ad that appeared in the Globe and Mail, Rogers’ Golden Syrup was made from sugar “imported from sunny sugar plantations of Fiji, British West Indies and Australia” (“Here’s News about Syrup” 1948, 12).

Through such advertising, B.C. Sugar’s marketers distinguished Rogers’ Golden Syrup from its competitors. They also tried to make such syrup seem exotic. As the ad in the Globe and Mail suggested, whether customers purchased “2-pound, 5-pound, or 10-pound tins,” they could all enjoy the
“tang of the tropical cane” (“Here’s News about Syrup” 1948, 12). Implicit in this phrase was the notion that, since cane syrup came from the tropics, it was more interesting than corn syrup, which came from North America. In-store strategies affirmed this intention. In 1956, Woodward’s department store in Edmonton invited customers to visit the store and “see the sugar canes from which Rogers’ Golden Syrup is made.” While there, they could also pick up “literature . . . telling how sugar and syrup are made from sugar cane” (“Woodward’s” 1956, 9). By exhibiting sugarcane this way, B.C. Sugar underscored the uniqueness of its product.

Many of B.C. Sugar’s syrup advertisements between 1945 and 1948 included illustrations of tropical settings. The earliest appearance of this type of advertising was among the most remarkable. Appearing in all of western Canada’s major newspapers throughout 1945 and three months into 1946, the ads displayed white consumers in the top half and a Rogers’ Golden Syrup tin perched atop harvested sugarcane, on a tropical beach, in the bottom half (“MOTHERS!” 1945, 11). According to the copy, mothers could promote “bounding health” by feeding their children Rogers’ Golden Syrup. A March 1945 advertisement from this series showed a smiling white soldier in a dinghy on the ocean; the copy argued that “this war has proved the value of quick-energy foods” (“This War” 1945, 2). In May of that year, this series showed a young girl who integrated Rogers’ Golden Syrup into her baking; the ad also included a heading that declared the syrup a “Valuable Food for Young Children” (“A Valuable Food” 1945, 4). The summer ads depicted a white mother strolling with her children, and the autumn ones showed, first, white children playing football and, second, a white husband eating a sandwich slathered with syrup (“Gay, Active Children” 1945, 5; “Soon They’ll Be Saying” 1945, 8). Finally, an ad in 1946 suggested that “Oldsters, Too, Need ‘Quick Energy’”; it featured a white mother, her children, and a man who is perhaps her father heading for a picnic in an oceanside, hilly, and lush park—perhaps Stanley Park in Vancouver (“Oldsters, Too, Need ‘Quick Energy’” 1946, 24).

By portraying syrup consumers as white and healthy, B.C. Sugar revealed an implicit assumption that Canadian shoppers responded well to associations of consumption with whiteness. As within most other Canadian advertising of this period more generally, B.C. Sugar made no attempt to diversify its depictions of consumers. Thus, although the Canadian census reported in 1951 that Indigenous and racialized people made up more than three percent of Canada’s population (Backhouse 1999, 5), there was little if any representation of Indigenous and racialized people as consumers within mainstream advertising. For B.C. Sugar, as for most major Canadian advertisers more generally, the typical modern Canadian consumer of this 1940s and 1950s was exclusively white.

After this campaign ended, B.C. Sugar continued to run advertisements that displayed tins of Rogers’ Golden Syrup atop sugarcane. Some of these ads appeared alongside announcements of the end of sugar rationing in 1947 (“NO COUPONS” 1947, 5). Others appeared within ads that highlighted the dual origins of Rogers’ Golden Syrup. That is, they portrayed not only sugarcane and tropical beaches but also scenes of ships, the Vancouver refinery, and the Rocky Mountains. In a May 1946 campaign, a can of Rogers’ Golden Syrup perched atop sugarcane dominates the foreground; in the background, a train runs through a mountain pass (“Rogers’ Golden Syrup,” Nanaimo Daily News 1956, 3). Through such imagery, B.C. Sugar emphasized its status as a British Columbia corporation, one that imported raw sugar from exotic locales but refined such sugar in Canada. More subtly, it also made visible its status as a settler colonial organization operating within a recently colonized territory. That is, both its Vancouver refinery and most of the train and highway networks upon which its sugar traveled were located on unceded Indigenous lands, and were hence accruing profit via the dispossession of Indigenous people. In particular, the city of Vancouver is situated on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations (British Columbia Assembly of First Nations n.d.). Thus, even as B.C. Sugar promoted anti-Black racism—and hence white supremacy—through its publicity, so was its actual existence predicated upon an assertion of white entitlement to Indigenous lands and resources.

Despite B.C. Sugar’s characterization of Rogers’ Golden Syrup as western Canadian, it continued to highlight its syrup’s tropical character. Throughout 1946 and 1947, the company ran a widely distributed advertisement that featured—as did so many others—a can of Rogers’ Golden Syrup sitting atop harvested sugarcane. In the foreground is a machete, and in the background is a tropical beach, complete with a person sailing a boat (“Rogers’ Golden Syrup” 1947, 11). More significantly, and throughout this period, B.C. Sugar ran a similar ad that appeared in the major newspapers of many western cities, including Winnipeg, Regina, Edmonton, Red Deer, Vancouver, Chilliwack, Nanaimo, and Victoria. This one features a can of golden syrup sitting on the ground near harvested sugarcane. In the background, however, is an illustration of a sugarcane plantation. It has a mill with belching smokestacks surrounded by palm trees. It has an ox pulling a cart laden with chopped sugarcane (“Rogers’ Golden Syrup,” The Province 1946, 13).
Most importantly, and unlike all of the other advertisements from this series, it has people. Specifically, on the left of the illustration, it has a Black man wearing a straw hat riding on top of the sugarcane in the cart. He is holding a whip in the air above the ox. On the right of the illustration are three more people. One is a white man wearing a suit and fedora. He is talking to a Black man wearing what appears to be a hooded sweatshirt and work pants. Behind them sits a seated Black figure, probably a woman given that the figure is rounder than the others; she is also wearing a large, feminine-style hat (“Rogers’ Golden Syrup,” The Province 1946, 15; see fig. 1).

This advertisement is significant for many reasons, not the least of which was the fact that in 1944, B.C. Sugar had purchased a sugarcane plantation in the Dominican Republic. Named Ozama, this plantation was the second overseas venture for B.C. Sugar. In 1905, the company had purchased a sugarcane plantation in Fiji and operated it until 1923 (Schreiner 1989, 130). Historians John Schreiner (1989) and Catherine LeGrand (1995) have already explored aspects of B.C. Sugar’s management of Ozama, with Schreiner offering extensive coverage of President Trujillo’s heavy taxation (130–46) and LeGrand exploring how the plantation’s Haitian and Dominican
employees engaged in informal labor resistance (566–91). Particularly significant about Ozama for my purposes here, however, is that the plantation had a predominantly white management team and a predominantly Black workforce. Such facts appear to be faithfully represented in this advertisement.

This ad, indeed, offers a visual reminder of the race relations that structured the Caribbean sugar trade. The illustration is correct to point out that white men dominated decision making, whereas Black men and women performed the work that enabled the plantation to function. Moreover, since the artist saw fit to include Black workers and a white manager in the ad, it is clear that B.C. Sugar itself viewed the race relations of the Caribbean sugar trade as potentially profitable. By including this plantation scene in its Canadian advertising, it sought to spark readers’ interest by calling attention to those involved in sugar production. Given that the Caribbean represented—for many white Canadians—an exotic place, this advertising strategy exploited the dynamics of plantation agriculture to make Rogers’ Golden Syrup seem as delectable as possible.

Additionally, this advertisement linked exoticism to authenticity. Many white newspaper readers in the 1950s would have been familiar with the European visual iconography of sugar plantations, much of which had emerged during the transatlantic slave trade era. As John Crowley (2016, 403–4) demonstrates, many European artists found inspiration in the Caribbean sugar enterprises. To the white Canadian reader, this advertisement would have been a reminder of sugarcane’s long history, together with its entanglements with slavery. This image thus further highlighted the supposed authenticity of Rogers’ Golden Syrup: it was a product steeped in tradition.

After 1948, B.C. Sugar ceased distributing this ad. In 1954, however, it distributed two full-color ads that each portrayed a Black person working the sugarcane harvest. The first featured a man chopping cane with a machete. He is standing on a white beach and is clothed in white. Behind him turquoise waters gleam; in front of him are stalks of sugarcane, tropical flowers, and a tin of Rogers’ Golden Syrup. According to the copy, only Rogers’ Golden Syrup offers “the pure cane Golden Syrup flavor!” (see fig. 2). This ad was printed as a full-page feature in the Canadian farm magazine The Country Guide in 1954, and it might have appeared elsewhere. The second ad, also in color, shows a man sitting atop a cart of sugarcane. He is wearing white; he is also carrying a whip and driving a team of oxen. His cart is traveling down a white sandy path toward a white beach, whereupon two figures are bringing in a sailboat from the water. Palm trees sway in the background. In the foreground is a can of Rogers’ Golden Syrup, a “pure sugar cane product.” The advertisement is signed by the artist, an unknown person named “Stephen” (see fig. 3). To date, it is known that this ad was printed on a billboard, possibly in the Vancouver area (B.C. Sugar 1990, 12). It is also known that the company deemed the ad significant enough to be stored in its company archives. Furthermore, the company reprinted the ad as a two-page spread in 1990 in its commemorative booklet titled 1890–1990: B.C. Sugar, 100 Years (12–15).

In some ways, these advertisements continued B.C. Sugar’s tradition of depicting tropical settings in its campaigns. Highlighting its syrup’s origins, these ads distinguished B.C. Sugar’s products from those of its corn syrup competitors. Yet the ads also represent a departure from earlier initiatives. Not only is the sugarcane harvester present in this illustration, he is also prominent. So striking is his presence, in fact, that it becomes necessary to consider what he represents. Why would B.C. Sugar issue two full-color advertisements of Rogers’ Golden Syrup featuring Black sugarcane harvesters?

To understand this phenomenon, it is useful to turn to the work of David Crockett. In his article “Marketing Blackness: How Advertisers Use Race to Sell Products,” he notes that twenty-first-century television advertisers have frequently deployed images of “blackness,” including of “black people or other symbolic and material artifacts of black cultural life,” to sell goods (2008, 245–46). According to Crockett, they do so for two reasons: to make “claims about the product/brand as a cultural resource” and to make “claims about the viewer that emphasize themes of similarity or difference” (245). Specifically, by associating a product or brand with Blackness, advertisers attempt to imbue that product or brand with characteristics that mark it as “authentic” (250).

B.C. Sugar’s 1954 advertisements featuring Black sugarcane harvesters are much different from twenty-first-century television advertising, but they do share one theme: the use of Blackness to convey authenticity (Crockett 2008, 250). It is clear that these advertisements in 1954 featured Black sugarcane harvesters because these men made Rogers’ Golden Syrup seem trustworthy. It was well known in Canada, as elsewhere, that the Caribbean had a long history of enslaved sugarcane work. Thus, by distributing the image of the Black sugarcane harvester, B.C. Sugar was playing on a long association between Black labor and the production of cane sugar. Harvested by none other than Black men skilled in sugarcane work, or so the advertisement suggested, the sugarcane that comprised Rogers’ Golden Sugar was of impeccable quality. It was truly authentic.
Black men in the advertisements of 1954, then, were symbols. Yet their presence was significant on another level as well. During the first half of the twentieth century, Black people were rarely presented in Canadian advertisements as consumers (Belisle 2011, 67–68). When they did appear, they were to labor for, and specifically to serve, whites. Such was the case with Aunt Jemima, as Thompson (2015) demonstrates. Thus, the appearance of these two Black sugarcane harvesters fit within that tradition. Chopping and transporting the sugarcane that eventually ended up in the mouths of white Canadians, these men performed the time-honored role within Canadian advertising of Black workers serving white consumers.
Finally, the Black workers in these two advertisements are not in positions of repose. Yes, the man sitting atop a pile of sugarcane is not engaged in hard physical labor, but he is nonetheless working: he is driving a team of six oxen. Such imagery confirms Crockett’s observation that advertisers tend to essentialize Black male bodies as “bodies built for endurance and unwavering labor” (2008, 258). In the twenty-first century, many ads of this type portray Black men as athletes specifically. But in the 1950s, as the Rogers’ Golden Syrup advertisements make clear, ads were just as apt to portray Black men as strong workers. Such imagery drew on the “centuries-old trope” that Peter Wood has referred to as the “black body as organic machine” (quoted in Crockett 2008, 259), but it also hearkened back specifically to the era of enslavement. Then, as in the advertisements in the 1950s, whites assumed Black male bodies to be strong and thus well suited to manual labor. By portraying two sugarcane harvesters as men hard at work, B.C. Sugar tapped into this cultural repertoire. In this way it underscored the supposed authenticity of its products.

Anti-Black Racism Epitomized: The Sugarcane Harvester Caricature

Prior to 1956, B.C. Sugar employed tropes of tropicality, plantation life, and Blackness in its advertising. In 1956, it continued these themes but also brought them to a new level. In October of that year, it introduced a new character into its advertising: a happy—yet also highly offensive—Black sugarcane worker. Standing beside stalks taller than he is, he is winking, smiling broadly, and giving an “okay” sign with his fingers (for example, “There’s Nothing Like...” October 1956, 18; also see fig. 4). Introduced at the same time as B.C. Sugar’s newest syrup product, Rogers’ Golden Pancake Syrup, this figure was always attached to it. He remained in circulation until April 1958, when B.C. Sugar switched to other themes. However, during the eighteen months between his first and last appearances, he appeared in at least ninety-five advertisements in major newspapers throughout western Canada. It is probable, moreover, that this number was higher. Since this current research was limited to digitized newspapers, it is possible that this figure was distributed even more widely.

Between October 1956 and April 1958, this figure appeared in the Vancouver Province, Vancouver Sun, Victoria Times Colonist, Edmonton Journal, Calgary Herald, Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, Regina Leader-Post, and Winnipeg Evening Tribune. Three different advertisements, which ran throughout this period in all of these newspapers, featured him. Each showcased him beside sugarcane. Each promoted Rogers’ Golden Pancake Syrup. And each offered a free recipe book with “80 delicious recipes featuring Rogers’ Golden Syrup”;

one had only to write to B.C. Sugar to obtain it. The front cover of this book was printed on all three of these advertisements. Significantly, it portrayed a white woman and her white daughter standing in a gleaming modern kitchen. They are wearing aprons and baking; the woman is also wearing high heels. Both are attired impeccably. Such imagery continued B.C. Sugar’s established tradition of portraying its consumers as white and modern. A pail of Rogers’ Golden Syrup, moreover, is on the counter. The woman is holding a plate of cupcakes aloft and smiling; her daughter is looking at the cupcakes with anticipation. A close-up color photograph of the cover of the recipe book, available in the City of Vancouver Archives, reveals the clean counters and midcentury modernist esthetic that pervade this image (Rogers’ Golden Syrup Recipes, early 1950s). Notably, the frontispiece of this book includes the same plantation imagery that accompanied B.C. Sugar’s earlier syrup campaigns. A man wearing a wide straw hat rides a loaded sugarcane cart, holding a whip above a tethered ox.

In the background are palm trees, a steamship, and hills. Because this illustration was included in Rogers’ Golden Syrup Recipes, it is clear that B.C. Sugar’s adworkers viewed the plantation imagery as especially compelling. They also viewed it as apt for selling cane syrup, as I will discuss below.

These advertisements were all distributed by a firm called James Lovick and Company (“Merchandising and Advertising News” 1957, 10). This detail is important, for Lovick himself, as we have seen, had worked on B.C. Sugar’s first major Rogers’ Golden Syrup campaign. It is unknown whether he participated in the campaigns of the 1940s. Yet, given that his advertising firm handled the advertisements of the 1950s, it is clear that B.C. Sugar had more than a passing affiliation with him. During the 1940s, Lovick had started his own firm, and “by 1958” it “was the largest Canadian ad agency,” with offices in Vancouver, “Edmonton, Halifax, New York, and San Francisco” (Wilson 2012).

It is important to recognize Lovick’s participation in B.C. Sugar’s syrup advertising, for it indicates that, rather than being a sole voice in the perpetuation of racist stereotypes of Black people, B.C. Sugar was joined by other white-owned businesses. Moreover, given that the Edmonton Journal, in March 1957, reported that Lovick had arranged the Rogers’ Golden Syrup placements, it is likely that Lovick’s firm, not B.C. Sugar, had designed the three ads (“Merchandising and Advertising News” 1957, 10). That does not mean that B.C. Sugar was uninvolved. Rather, it shows that B.C. Sugar and Lovick’s company were complicit in perpetuating anti-Black racism through advertising.

In considering why B.C. Sugar would engage in such racism, one might respond that such imagery well represented the long-established tradition at B.C. Sugar of highlighting its products’ cane origins. To distinguish its products from other sweeteners, as we have seen, B.C. Sugar had long played up the fact that all of its goods were made from sugarcane. Nonetheless, it is also important to point out that the 1956–58 advertising series was a departure. The pre-1956 ads clearly exploited Black people’s labor and bodily images to sell sugar to white consumers. The 1956 campaign continued this tradition but also introduced new themes. Whereas the pre-1956 advertisements depicted Black plantation workers as adults, the 1956–58 series depicted Black workers—Black men in particular—as childlike. Indeed, the 1956–58 figure is neither man nor child. He is of indeterminate age, old enough to be harvesting sugarcane, but young enough to have an undeveloped physique and an impish—though unthreatening—wink. In fact, he closely resembles the “Sambo” stereotype, common in white settler countries throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As David Pilgrim (2000)
suggests, by 1899—the year the children’s book Little Black Sambo was published—the Sambo stereotype was deeply entrenched and “symbolized the lazy, grinning, docile, child-like, good-for-little servant.”

Hence, during the same era—the 1950s—in which Black Canadians were engaging in sustained campaigns for civil and human rights (Waters 2013), B.C. Sugar saw fit to introduce a highly racist anti-Black caricature, one that hearkened back to established racist depictions of Black boys and men. Significantly, however, it was not the only corporation to do so. In 1957, and as Kwate (2019) demonstrates, a pancake restaurant named Sambo’s opened in Santa Barbara, California (45). The next year, a restaurant named Lil Black Sambos opened in Lincoln City, Oregon (Kwate 2019, 55). This latter restaurant is, as of November 2020, still operating (Lil’ Sambo’s Family Restaurant n.d.). Yet, whereas Lil Sambo’s remained in one location, Sambo’s became a franchise, opening throughout the American west (Kwate 2019, 56). In 1964 one Canadian location—in Vancouver—also appeared; it was called “Black Sambo Pancake House” (Kilian 2008, Kindle loc. 2924). Although most of these restaurants closed during the 1970s and 1980s, the original one remains in operation (Kwate 2019, 72).

In her analysis of why, during the same decades that the “Civil Rights movement ignited radical social change,” white Americans would go to restaurants with clearly anti-Black racist names, Kwate (2019) suggests that such patronage provided reassurance that white racial privileges would be protected. As she states, “Images of faithful slaves have arisen in reaction to eras in which Black folk have pressed for racial equality” (79). It is therefore relevant that during the 1940s and 1950s in Vancouver, arguments for greater racial tolerance were gaining strength. White journalists were becoming more vocal in their criticisms of anti-Black racism; as well, anti-racist advocacy helped to end such policies as “the ban on nonwhite use of the Crystal Pool near Stanley Park” (Kilian 2008, Kindle loc. 2866). By introducing the Sambo-type character into its advertising, B.C. Sugar and its advertising agency may have been trying to protect white supremacy in the face of increased rights activism. By purchasing Rogers’ Golden Syrup, white consumers could reassure themselves that they were superior to Black people. More than this, by eating Rogers’ Golden Syrup, they could physically ingest what may have been, for some, the comforting imagery of the transatlantic slave trade, in which amusing and infantile Black bodies made goods for whites.

If the Sambo-type caricature within B.C. Sugar’s advertising of the 1956–58 period may have placated race-based fears, so may it also have helped B.C. Sugar’s executives deal with racial conflict in the Dominican Republic. As LeGrand (1995) indicates, Ozama’s white managers expressed frustration with Black sugarcane workers’ multiple forms of resistance. From refusing to work on Sundays, to leaving to tend to their own rice fields, to sabotaging equipment and rail lines, Ozama’s sugarcane workers shaped their workplaces in ways that suited their needs. Given that such needs conflicted with the Canadian managers’ drive for productivity, the Canadians expressed impatience. Yet, rather than trying to understand the sugarcane workers’ motivations, they chalked up their actions to personality defects. In his 1956 memoir of his time in Ozama, B.C. Sugar’s president, Forrest Rogers, states that the cane workers were “indolent, insolent, and ignorant” (quoted in LeGrand 1995, 579). As a result, the “outstanding feature” of his time there was “frustration” (Forrest Rogers n.d.). At Ozama, the white Canadian management team viewed the Black Dominican workforce as infantile. Such views are well represented in the anti-Black cane worker caricature that B.C. Sugar introduced in 1956.

So, though it is unclear whether or not James Lovick and Company had actually conferred with B.C. Sugar’s officials about their time in Ozama, the fact that this advertising firm began distributing ads featuring a racist, Sambo-type caricature, during the period in which B.C. Sugar was operating in Ozama, is significant. More than this, given that these ads continued B.C. Sugar’s tradition of including plantation scenes — and even Black cane harvesters — in its advertising, it is probable that those responsible for the ad would have viewed it as a logical continuation of established practices.

Finally, it must be recognized that white members of the North American food industry have long associated Black people, particularly, with pancakes. Since 1919, and as Thompson (2015) demonstrates, Quaker Oats had been creating an association between Blackness and pancakes, specifically through its extensive promotion of Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix (208). Well known by midcentury, Aunt Jemima appeared in advertisements throughout both Canada and the United States; she also appeared as a live actor in various events. Aunt Jemima was so well-recognized that in 1955 California’s Disneyland opened a pancake restaurant called Aunt Jemima’s Pancake House, renamed Aunt Jemima’s Kitchen in 1962. This concept proved so successful, Thompson (2015) notes, that in 1965 a pancake chain of the same name was established in Ontario (229–30). In fact, it was perhaps due to the success of the Aunt Jemima brand that the owners of Sambo’s Pancake House decided to associate their own business with anti-Black racist imagery.

Certainly, when B.C. Sugar introduced its pancake syrup in 1956, it would have been well aware of Aunt Jemima. Western Canadian newspapers frequently carried Aunt Jemima advertisements, often on the same page as advertisements for Rogers’ Golden Syrup. Every year during the 1950s, in the days prior to Pancake Tuesday (a Christian Lenten
tradition), many grocers advertised in-store deals on pancake and syrup products. These ads usually featured brands such as Aunt Jemima, Rogers’ Golden Syrup, Bee Hive Corn Syrup, and Colony Maple Syrup, among others. Many of them, moreover, had prominent illustrations of Aunt Jemima. Often, as in a Super-Valu ad from 1956, probably created by James Lovick and Company, Aunt Jemima and Rogers’ Golden Syrup products were featured together (‘‘m-m-m PANCAKES ’n SYRUP’’ 1956, 20; see fig. 5). Such advertising fostered a racist, well-recognized connection between anti-Black advertising tropes and pancakes.

Thus, when considering why James Lovick and Company, together with B.C. Sugar, would introduce a Sambo-like character into its advertising in 1956, it is clear that they had many reasons to do so. These reasons may have included a desire to assert white racial privilege in an era characterized by increased anti-racist advocacy. B.C. Sugar’s history of emphasizing its syrup’s sugarcane origins, its tendency to portray its syrup as exotic, its highlighting of plantation scenery, its two earlier forays into featuring images of Black sugarcane harvesters, and its determination to play on preexisting, racist associations of Blackness with pancakes were further at play.

Finally, it must be said that widespread racial prejudice within western Canada also contributed to the ads’ existence. If B.C. Sugar and James Lovick and Company had been concerned that a backlash would target such advertising, they would have thought twice about distributing them. Given that they went ahead with the advertisements, they demonstrated not only their support for anti-Black racism but also their assumption that their prejudices were shared by others. Indeed, given that these ads ran in major newspapers for eighteen months, their assumption was largely right. B.C. Sugar, James Lovick and Company, and the presses with which they partnered might not have invented anti-Black racism. Nor did they invent the idea that whites’ comfort and wealth should be enhanced by Blacks’ labor and images. Yet, by including the stereotype of Sambo within their Rogers’ Golden Pancake Syrup campaign, they supported and extended white people’s exploitation of Black people during this period.

Conclusion

In 1969, Harold Kassarjian published a study of how Black people were portrayed in American advertising. Through a survey of twelve mass market magazines, he found that representations of African Americans between 1946 and 1965 improved slightly, with 78 percent being portrayed as having “laborer or service jobs” in 1946 and only 13 percent in the same category in 1965 (35–36). Yet he also found that, when it came to representations of non-Americans, the numbers of Black people in service and manual labor remained fairly steady, with 48 percent in that category in 1946 and 45 percent in 1965 (37). For these and other reasons, he concluded that, despite advertisers’ lip service to racial equality, “the advertising industry” could not “take particular pride in their supposedly newly found social responsibility” (39).

Kassarjian’s remarks were specific to the United States, yet they also held true for Canada. As the case of Rogers’ Golden Syrup indicates, at least one major Canadian company—B.C. Sugar—during the 1940s and 1950s consistently portrayed Black people in manual labor roles. More than this, B.C. Sugar suggested that Black people were foreign and exotic and inferior to white people. In one heinous case, B.C. Sugar further suggested that Black people’s primary function within advertising was to amuse white readers.

The case of Rogers’ Golden Syrup demonstrates that, despite widespread anti-racist activism during this period, the western Canadian advertising industry remained resistant to social change. For B.C. Sugar, as for other Canadian food companies such as Quaker Oats, it was apparently more profitable to trade in dehumanizing views of Black people than it was to work toward racial equality. Such decisions, in turn, reflected the broader entrenchedness of white supremacy at this time. Even as provincial legislatures across the country—including in the Canadian west—passed anti-discrimination laws, significant anti-Black racism persisted.

Finally, the Rogers’ Golden Syrup campaigns offer reminders of how the food industry has traded historically on racialized stereotyping. Seeking to distinguish itself from its corn syrup competitors, B.C. Sugar’s syrup advertisements between 1947 and 1958 used images of Black people to highlight the use of sugarcane in its products. Such ads capitalized on imagery created during the transatlantic slave trade era, in which enslaved Black people labored on sugarcane plantations, providing products and services for white people. The ads also replicated contemporary conditions of racial inequality on cane plantations in the Dominican Republic. Given that B.C. Sugar owned and operated its own cane plantation in that country during this time, its representations of Black people in its Canadian advertising campaigns become especially offensive. Exploiting not only the actual labor of Black Caribbean workers in the Dominican Republic but also certain constructed images of Black Caribbean laborers in Canada, B.C. Sugar was a company that both traded in and was founded on actually existing white supremacy.
FIGURE 5: Aunt Jemima Pancake Flour and Rogers’ Light Syrup Advertisement, Vancouver Sun, February 9, 1956, 29.

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Notes

1. During the period under study, the name Rogers’ Golden Syrup was rendered with an apostrophe. Currently, however, the brand sells as Rogers Golden Syrup. To reflect the brand’s historical name, the apostrophe is used in this article.

2. Rogers’ Golden Syrup ads continued to appear after 1960, but I have located any further advertising featuring Black people.

3. I located these advertisements through archival research and digital research. I undertook the former at the City of Vancouver Archives, where the B.C. Sugar collection is housed (AM 1592). I undertook the latter by performing keyword searches for “Rogers’ Golden Syrup,” “B.C. Sugar,” and related words in the following newspaper databases: British Colonist (www.britishcolonist.ca/index.html); Globe and Mail: Canada’s Heritage from 1844 (http://search.proquest.com/publication/13965534); Manitoba: Digital Resources on Manitoba History (http://manitobia.ca/content/en/newspapers); Newspapers.com (www.newspapers.com); and Peel’s Prairie Provinces (http://peel.library.ualberta.ca/index.html).

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City of Vancouver Archives. B.C. Sugar Fonds, AM 1592.


“m-m-m PANCAKES ‘n SYRUP.” 1956. Vancouver Sun, February 9, 1956. 29.


